

Farmer Profile

Claude and Linda Sheppard

C&M Organic Enterprises, Madera County

C&M ORGANIC ENTERPRISES



Claude and Linda Sheppard slowly transitioned into a beneficial insect program to control cotton pests on their farm. They received their organic certification in 1995.

Organic Farming in Cotton Country

"It can't be done," the skeptics said initially. "You were just lucky," others commented. But when Claude and Linda Sheppard's first crop of transitional cotton sold for \$1.35 to \$1.45 per pound (conventional cotton fetched just 54 to 74 cents per pound) in 1992 and generated a net profit, they proved it could be done. And they've continued proving it since then.

The 1,200-acre Sheppard Ranch is in Chowchilla, at the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley cotton belt. In 1988 the Sheppards decided to stop using insecticides on their cotton. In 1992, following three years of experimenting with beneficial insect releases, they eliminated herbicides and conventional defoliants altogether. The result? Their

1993, 800-acre cotton crop was another blockbuster.

Early on there were skeptics in every corner. "Our worst battles," Linda recalls, "weren't necessarily with the bugs."

"Because of this you must believe in what you're doing," Claude advises, "and be willing to face setbacks. There are too many times when pressures will influence you to go back to traditional farming practices."

Every year since 1992 the Sheppards have sold their cotton for more than \$1 per pound, and provided a real litmus test for their organic methods. The 1995 growing season was one of the worst pest years in the San Joaquin Valley. "We are aware of growers who were spraying their cotton every two weeks to control mites and aphids, at a

total cost of about \$150 per acre" said Linda. "We had to boost up our beneficial insect populations twice, but it cost us considerably less than \$40 per acre because we handled our beneficials and monitored our own fields. Sure, we had some insect damage, but no more than on the sprayed fields. And while other farmers had tremendous problems with lygus, we had none."

A University of California, Santa Cruz entomologist routinely tests the Sheppards' cotton and samples other farms where cotton is conventionally grown. "The entomologist has found as good, and in some cases, better controls in our fields because of the beneficial insects," says Claude.

During 1995 the Sheppards received their organic certification. In addition to maintaining their farming livelihood, the process of converting to an organic operation has yielded some unexpected benefits. In response to farmer interest in what they've accomplished, they formed a new company, C&M Organic Enterprises, in 1993 to help other growers begin to make the transition to organic farming. They've advised 15-20 growers on several thousand acres on how to ease into a beneficial insect program.

They have also reaped some unanticipated benefits on the farm. "When we were spraying, we had stopped seeing any wildlife—even cottontails," Linda recalls. "Now that we have insectary plants and other habitat, we've got songbirds, butterflies, pheasants, opossums, and other animals."

"A true farmer loves the land," says Claude. "We didn't start out doing this for wildlife, but it's good to see natural systems working here again...it's great to see so many animals back on the farm."